

2-1976

1976 Vol. 02: Our Commitments and Our Priorities

The Generalate Team

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Repository Citation

The Generalate Team. (1976). 1976 Vol. 02: Our Commitments and Our Priorities. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/id/4>

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Our Commitments and Our Priorities

1 - The Signs

"In view of the special character of our Institute . . . it is necessary that:

- *the Generalate, the Provinces and Districts draw up a list of apostolic priorities within our possibility to fulfill;*
- *we take a critical look at our present commitments in the light of these priorities;*
- *each Province and District then suggest to the Generalate, works which they think Spiritans might undertake."* (G/A 13)

An important task and an urgent task, indeed! We cannot at the same time, keep the commitments we have made and respond also to the demands of the new "Mission," as presently understood. It is vital for a Congregation to be able to respond to the demands and needs of today's Mission, and to those that we foresee for tomorrow.

Our commitments raise another more fundamental question, that of our "missionary and Spiritan identity."

These questions are not new. However, we find today, not only among ourselves, but in other Congregations as well, the desire to emerge from a confused present situation, with its questions and its doubts. We want to launch out again, guided by the new light thrown on the apostolate by changes in the Church and in the world.

"Give us a star!"

"We don't want to be comfortable. We're prepared to live with trial and error. We're ready to become stateless persons. We're ready to go out again and again. Don't underrate us! But we need so much 'the rapture of an inspiration!' The cycle which made experience so

valuable is spent, so that starting with the problems and difficulties is not going to stimulate. The problems are new and formidable. A 'cold-coming' we'll have of it maybe, but without a star we will never set out." (Father Michael Cahill, a young missionary)

"We need an ideal"

"What seems to be missing is a vision for the future of the Congregation . . . Where are we going? And always, there is the underlying problem of the loss of our identity, in general, and of our Spiritan identity, in particular. We have rooted ourselves too deeply in our work . . . we no longer dare to change . . . to take risks . . . we need an ideal." (Spiritan Recollection, Morogoro)

With the decline of a missionary epoch that is ending, a new missionary epoch is coming to birth. Would it not be to our advantage to try to foresee it now, and to determine precisely what will eventuate?

Such an effort will certainly help us to better determine our Spiritan and missionary identity, and to focus more clearly on our actual and future commitments. (G/A 13)

We propose to treat these questions in the four following I/D's, which together will form a unit.

I/D 4: to point out the signs of renewal in our experiences

I/D 5: to describe the important developments of Mission

I/D 6: to suggest orientations, commitments and projects for us

I/D 7: to come to clearer conclusions about "Spiritan identity."

Thus, together, we hope to determine our course and our commitments. Everyone's contribution will be important!

The Generalate Team

What We Hear...

The best place to seek our new missionary directives is in that most interesting book, the book of daily life. It is in the Provinces and Districts, first and foremost, that the signs of the new "Mission" manifest themselves. There, we can hear, indeed, "what the Spirit is saying to the Churches."

From a District – Mauritius

The recent visitation of Mauritius by Father Timmermans and Father Gross was an enchanting experience for both of them. "We could easily have allowed ourselves to be seduced by the beauty of it all," they confessed, "an alive Church rich with promise, would move anyone to want to stay there."

"In this cosmopolitan country, there is an international Spiritan group. Irishmen, Englishmen, Frenchmen, one Canadian, three Mauritians and a native of Reunion, make up a group of 26, all united under 'the two Jeans,' Bishop Jean Margeot, the driving force and center of unity, and Father Jean Eon, the engaging Principal Superior. Everyone appreciates the presence of this small but truly international group of Spiritans.

"The vitality of the group, and that's an understatement, manifested itself from the very beginning of our meeting. Almost the first questions we heard were: 'Are we in a missionary situation here?' 'What is our missionary presence in Mauritius?' 'What of the future?' Interesting questions, indeed, which reveal the actual concerns of day to day living – a missionary project, in the strict sense of the word.

"It was an intensely interesting dialogue with all the confreres, with the bishop and with others, as we sought to discover the signs which would enable us to precisely determine our missionary presence within the local Church, responsible to the bishop, and conscious of the actual situation of the country. Some of the signs which emerged among others:

- A new initiative for the formation of religious and priestly vocations and for training community leaders.
- Research for a plan for the catechesis of the young and of students;
- The beginnings of district communities and of a district pastoral plan;
- Commitments to the "voiceless;"
- Development of a missionary animation center near Father Laval's tomb;
- Inter-island meetings of the Principal Superiors of the Indian Ocean, etc.

"In these living realities, one can see the plan of our priorities and missionary engagements. It is possible from these beginnings to further develop 'a missionary project,' in this multi-racial country which contains 500,000 Hindus alone.

"Naturally, the 'signs' in a District like Mauritius are proper to itself; but there are all the other districts too. To listen to each and to ponder the totality is to hear an inner voice, telling us definitely where we are bound."

From a Province – Spain

"The task of promotion and development in the Province of Spain is carried on mainly through the efforts of the missionary animation teams in Barcelona and Madrid.

"In order to develop missionary vocations, we work with young people in the education centers and university residences. In places like these it is possible to engage in dialogue with young people.

"At the moment, we are organizing meetings with young people in our own communities, and especially at the Novitiate in Castrillo de la Vega." (Father Machado, Provincial)

Young people from all over are coming to our communities to participate for a while, in the life of our young confreres, to share their community life and their missionary plans.

It is well to note that this points up an area in which the Provinces could actually involve themselves in a new missionary direction – missionary and community animation, definite signs of a missionary commitment and a missionary ideal.

From a New Foundation: the East African Spiritans

"Our East African foundation is already well under way. It incorporates Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia and has its own novitiate. From the beginning the intention has been to give the whole foundation a missionary dimension. The scholastics are being trained as missionaries and it is felt that young priests should from the beginning of their apostolic careers leave their own country so as to work abroad, e.g. in other parts of Africa. In this way it is hoped to develop the missionary image of the local Church in East Africa." (Father W. Gandy)

How the times and situations change! A most impressive sign, indeed, is the fostering of missionary vocations in the local Church, in the

different continents, in diverse cultures. A "small conversion" here or there, could be still another opportunity for the "Mission" and for the Congregations themselves.

From a Young Confrere in the Middle East

Father Istifan Stirnemann, of the District of Mauritania, is presently living in Syria for the purpose of learning not only the Arab language but the Arab mentality as well. The reflections he offers correspond to some extent with our own preoccupations. Basically these are the questions which must concern us all.

"I have always admired Libermann and his tremendous missionary enthusiasm: to bring the Good News, in the spirit of Saint Paul, to all men, to every social class, to the most spiritually and materially deprived, and above all, to the most abandoned, forsaken apparently by the Church herself.

"Unless we maintain this same enthusiasm, how can we call ourselves Spiritans? However, I fear that our last two Chapters have a bit too quickly buried the notion of 'first evangelisation' which constitutes our specific mission as Spiritans, as sons of Libermann.

"There are still millions of men and women, a large part of the human race, who have never heard of Christ; whole countries without any missionary presence whatever. With a little more imagination, I think we can reach these people.

"But even for those who should be far more advanced and for the Church, in general, the notion of the mission is being narrowed more and more to the concept of 'assisting the young Churches.'

"I am sure that if Libermann were alive today, he would be throwing us into new missions, into remote places among the Kirdis of Cameroun, the Haoussas, the Tambacounda of Saint Louis in Senegal; into places like Mauritania, Lybia, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan.

"Only recently the Congregation began to dialogue with Islam – an area in which the Spirit seems to be moving mightily.

"On the subject of large non-christian religions, Pope Paul VI recently reminded us: 'Neither respect, nor esteem for these religions, nor the complexity of the questions they raise should prevent the Church from announcing to them the Good News of Jesus Christ.'

"Is not this announcement of the Good News, both in attitude and in dialogue, in line with the truest Spiritan vocation? We could use many many missionaries to establish in many places this dialogue with Islam... Unfortunately,

ly, the mission in Moslem countries is very difficult. I have learned from difficult experience how long and difficult the study of Arabic can be and what effort and sweat it demands.

"How often the question occurs to me – and I pass it on to you: 'Suppose we had some Arab Spiritans?' Female religious of all sorts and kinds have established themselves in the Middle-East. They have fostered many vocations and have even sent them elsewhere as missionaries – to Mauritania for instance. Will the boys be less generous than the girls?

"During my first days in Damascus, I was struck by many things:

- the vitality of the young christians in Damascus and their generosity in giving of themselves.
- the lack of missionary spirit in the local communities. We feel once again the absence of a permanent mission.
- the fact of hearing from high religious authorities, reflections such as these: 'You, religious, missionaries above all, have a very valuable spiritual formation... This is what our priests need, we need formation leaders for our young... A little of your missionary spirit would not hurt us... We are in missionary country here.'

"Is it not possible, I asked myself, to see and hear in all this a call from the Spirit to the Spiritans? What a fruitful exchange there could be. We could bring our missionary spirit, our solid Libermann spirituality, and our world wide missionary experience... We could receive so much from the Orientals: their wisdom, their liturgy, and above all, for the universal mission of the Church, the generosity of their young people..."

What We See . . .

Travelling through the Provinces and Districts, we discover everywhere signs of the presence of a new "Mission" and a new orientation of our commitments. Some of these signs are very real, indeed, and gave us great cause for hope.

- Our first priority for animation, according to Guidelines for Animation, is that of building Christian communities, the care of religious and priestly vocations, the formation of a committed and responsible laity. We are finding evidence of initiatives in these areas in the annual reports which we are receiving. More and more we seem to be trying to contribute, to the development of the local Churches, especially toward self-sufficiency in personnel.

- More and more our presence is expressing itself in terms of "service" under the responsibility of the bishops. We believe firmly in participating in the priorities of the local Church. We note, though, the difficulty at times of joining integration into the local Church with our presence and activity as missionaries, properly so called.
- We are becoming conscious of the need of sensitizing communities and local (churches) to being missionary. "Make us missionaries; give us your religious spirit. This is what we expect from you." (*A bishop to the Spiritans of a certain District*)
- Along these lines, to our concern for priestly and religious vocations must be added, a concern for developing missionaries in the local churches in the places where we are working. Thus, the question of Spiritans from Africa and other developing countries acquires a new perspective.
- Increasingly, we seem to be pondering some basic realities: "We are too well-established." "We do not dare to take risks." "We are confusing ourselves too much with the local churches." "Since the General Chapter of 1974, any commitment is considered as a missionary commitment." One gets the distinct impression that the desire for a new start is quite evident among us.
- Updating courses are now quite customary and continuing formation teams have been established. We are planning mobile teams, even international ones.
- Pilot teams and renewed communities are coming into being in our Provinces and Districts.
- The projects of the young, formulated in dialogue with those in charge, are reflecting the new idea of Mission. To lend an ear to them all; to give each one his chance, is promising for the apostolate and a definite asset for the Congregation.
- Mutual aid and solidarity are developing. In witness of this, we cite the recent meetings of the different groups of Principal Superiors, inter-Provincial consultations, and the support for Angola and for the new foundations.
- We are searching for some action in the area of "exchanges among the Churches" especially in countries or continents which traditionally have a one-dimensional view of things. It would be good, for example,

if missionaries from the Third World could bring testimonies from their Churches to the Churches of Europe. As another example, we could cite the fact that several of our houses, in a diversity of works, would welcome the presence of Africans.

- Some Provinces are reacting to "a new missionary era" with a new style of missionary animation. They are forming communities which are "centers of religious and missionary life" and mounting a complete research effort into the various ways of formation, preferring to take risks rather than abandon a project. In one or other Province, new forms of belonging to the Congregation are also being developed.
- Some young people and some not so young, in an ever growing number, are committing themselves or are pondering a commitment to "frontier-situations," an opening to non-christian religions, Islam, in particular. They hope to seek out those who are the most alienated to announce the Gospel, to become truly, men who know no boundaries. They hope to be open and accessible, ministers of reconciliation and of communion among peoples, cultures and religions; ministers who will oppose oppressive structures and defend the defenseless.

We have already listed 12 signs and we must stop. Let us add, though, not a new element, but that which is the result of all these, spiritual renewal.

It could well be said that we are being optimistic! Leave us with our optimism. We know the difficulties well enough, and lest we forget, there are some who make it their duty to constantly remind us of them.

Behind the signs we list on these pages, one might discern the profiles of some well-known confreres, in whose faces are reflected the signs of hope which we have tried to gather and to share with you. We leave them nameless, though, lest, by oversight, we offend anyone.

In the next issue we shall continue our investigation of Commitments and Priorities by pointing out the developments and the demands of "Mission" which we have discerned from a study of the signs. Any suggestions you may have to offer are useful to us. Together we shall find our way!

The Generalate Team